

Bush Urges Gorbachev to Avoid A Military Assault in Lithuania

U.S. Weighs Goals of Independence and Stability

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WASHINGTON, March 22 — President Bush appealed to President Mikhail S. Gorbachev today to avoid using military force in Lithuania as the Administration sought to balance its formal support for Lithuanian independence with its concern for stability in Eastern Europe.

While the Administration has taken a muted approach in its public statements to avoid increasing tensions between Moscow and Lithuania, officials said, it has privately warned the Soviet Union that the use of military force would be a serious setback for relations between Moscow and the West.

As the war of nerves between the Lithuanians and Moscow unfolds with rival claims of sovereignty, Mr. Gorbachev has himself disavowed force, although he has followed up such assurances with decrees intended to demonstrate the Kremlin's power and suggest its options.

The Americans' Dilemma

A senior United States official said, "The aspirations of the Lithuanians must remain our primary objective." But officials said Washington was increasingly uncertain about Mr. Gorbachev's intentions and about how far the Lithuanians might push the Kremlin.

Such doubts have left the United States caught between its official policy of insisting on Lithuanian independence and Mr. Bush's oft-stated goal of managing democratic reform in Eastern Europe without dangerously upsetting traditional military balances.

Amid the policy debate, the United States and the Soviet Union came to terms today on a long-term grain agreement that guarantees an export market for an additional million tons annually of American wheat, feed grains and soybeans over the next five years, the Government announced. [Page D1.]

American interests have become increasingly entangled with Mr. Gorbachev's political fortunes and Administration officials are privately expressing surprise, and apparently some frustration, that Mr. Gorbachev has not gained more control over the pace of Lithuania's quest for independence.

Avoiding Concrete Proposals

The United States has carefully avoided offering solutions to either side. Mr. Bush said this approach was intended to avoid inflaming tensions, but it has left the White House open to criticism from members of Congress and Baltic groups in the United States who say it should take a firmer stand on Lithuanian independence.

"The dilemma is this," one official said. "Everyone wants to protect Gorbachev since he symbolizes the improvement in our relationship. But there is also a strong pull to support Lithuanian independence, and people are afraid that one side or the other will do something to cause the bubble to burst."

Administration officials said they were coming to see the Lithuanian

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situation as a test of Mr. Gorbachev's leadership and his willingness to allow political reform. "A resort to force under these circumstances would do enormous violence to everything that Mr. Gorbachev has said he stands for," Defense Secretary Dick Cheney said today.

So far, the United States "is inclined" to accept Soviet assurances that Moscow will not use military force in Lithuania, a senior official said. Washington sees Mr. Gorbachev's recent moves toward Lithuania more as an attempt to intimidate leaders of the Baltic republic into backing down from their quest for complete independence, officials said.

Surprise at Gorbachev's Delay

A senior official said the United States was surprised that Mr. Gorbachev had waited so long to begin this sort of "maneuvering."

"At first, Gorbachev did very little and let this whole thing just come on down the chute until now it's gone beyond the point of easily reversing, or slowing down," he said. "And now he seems to be trying to put the brakes on it."

Administration officials declined to say what, if anything, the Kremlin has

Washington feels Moscow may just be 'trying to put the brakes on.'

told Washington about the sort of compromise Mr. Gorbachev might be willing to accept in Lithuania. Asked today whether the Soviet leader has the ability or desire to let Lithuania go, Mr. Bush hesitated and said, "I guess I'd have to say I honestly don't know the answer to your question."

Deal Might Be Sought

The senior official said Mr. Gorbachev might be seeking a way to give a deal with Lithuania "enough fig leaves so he can claim he stopped" secession.

"They've gone past the point of federation now, which is what Gorbachev says they are," the official said. "But they are not completely past the point of confederation or a titular independence ceding defense to the Soviet Union, or defense and foreign policy."

He said Mr. Gorbachev's handling of the Lithuania crisis has called into

question his "decisiveness in setting bottom lines" and handling of other domestic problems.

Officials said Washington and Moscow have been in frequent diplomatic contact. There was a meeting this week in the White House between Brent Scowcroft, the President's national security adviser, and the Soviet Ambassador, Yuri V. Dubinin. On Tuesday in Namibia, Secretary of State James A. Baker 3d and Foreign Minister Eduard A. Shevardnadze discussed Lithuania.

In such meetings, officials said, the United States has expressed what one called "growing alarm" about Lithuania.

"The Soviets are trying to increase the pressure on Lithuania and get them to back off from a very precipitous run at independence," another official said. "We want to avoid any dramatic moves that hard-liners in Moscow could call a provocation, but at the same time we're trying to convey a very clear and firm message that any use of force would be dangerous."

Bush's Stated Position

At a news conference on the South Lawn of the White House this morning, Mr. Bush was asked about the Soviet leadership's most recent moves in Lithuania. He said he "wouldn't put that down as peaceful evolution," a principle to which he said both he and

Mr. Gorbachev were committed.

But Mr. Bush was quick to add, "That's a matter to be discussed between the Lithuanians themselves, having declared their independence, and the Soviet officials."

Mr. Bush repeatedly reasserted Washington's refusal to recognize that Lithuania is part of the Soviet Union. "However," he said, "there are certain realities in life. The Lithuanians are well aware of them."

Mr. Bush publicly expressed a growing anxiety within the Administration about the lack of a firm date for the next Bush-Gorbachev summit meeting, which is to be held in late June. Mr. Baker offered Mr. Shevardnadze several possible dates for the meeting, officials said, but received no reply.

"We should pin this matter down soon," Mr. Bush said.

Administration officials said the Soviet Union apparently has delayed agreeing to a date because of internal problems, including the Baltic situation and apparent indecision about whether to hold the meeting before or after an important Communist Party meeting in June.